

Associated Press Newswires

Funding cuts force Legal Aid to reduce services

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CHARLESTON, W.Va. (AP) - Shrinking revenue is forcing Legal Aid of West Virginia to close six satellite offices and lay off 17 employees by January.

The agency provides free legal representation in civil cases to about 24,000 low-income people annually. Legal Aid lawyers help victims of domestic violence, and they supervise the ombudsman program that sends advocates into all the state's nursing homes.

"We are here for people who have no place to turn," Adrienne Worthy, executive director for the agency, said Tuesday. "Our phones ring off the hook now. I do not look forward to saying, 'I'm sorry. We can't help you.'"

The Legal Aid board agreed Saturday to close satellite offices in Fayetteville, Madison, Pineville, Welch, Winfield and Williamson. Satellite facilities in Clay, Hamlin and Summersville and all 11 regional offices will remain open.

Decreases in two funding sources prompted the cuts, Worthy said.

Legal Aid gets funding from the federal Legal Services Corp. based on a formula that counts the number of poor people in a service area. West Virginia lost 30,000 poor people, according to Census figures used by the Legal Services Corp.

The population drop will reduce Legal Aid of West Virginia's budget by \$400,000.

The agency also receives a percentage of money from the Interest On Lawyers' Trust Accounts. Lawyers in private practice give a percentage of the interest on money in trust accounts to Legal Aid organizations in all 50 states.

Low interest rates could mean \$300,000 less from that source, Worthy said.

Because of the funding cuts, 17 people will lose their jobs, including lawyers, paralegals, management and support staff, she said.

West Virginia has one Legal Aid lawyer for every 7,895 poor people in the state. For people who can afford lawyers, there is one lawyer to every 368 people, she said.

Nate Bowles, president and chairman of Legal Aid's board, said the agency plans to continue taking on "the cases that evidence the most desperate need."